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Jewish Poverty in the Media:

Why are poor Jews rarely found in media portrayals of the American Jewish community, and how can the media make Jewish poverty a more urgent concern?

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In 1972, journalist Paul Cowan spent weeks roaming Manhattan's Lower East Side on assignment for the Village Voice, searching for the Jewish poor. He didn't have to look far. "Most people think of the Jewish immigration as the most spectacularly successful one in American history," Cowan wrote, "but the 50-year journey from the shtetle to the Space Age left many casualties in its wake."

At the time, an estimated 250,000 Jews in New York City lived below the poverty line. Most were elderly, many were Orthodox, but there were also young people and Jews of various religious beliefs in the mix—struggling, proud, scared, largely invisible, and as Cowan painfully acknowledged, posing a challenge to liberal Jewish values and identity.

"They feel as if they've been abandoned by uptown liberal Jewish intellectuals, politicians and philanthropists who, they think, care more about blacks and Puerto Ricans than about the nagging problems of the Jewish slums," he wrote. "And, worse than that, they have been abandoned by their own children. Many successful young people who have escaped the neighborhood haven't sent their parents money or even mail in years. And many of those who still help out do so with visible annoyance."

With his deep reporting and unsparing prose, Cowan pierced through the stereotype of the supposed American Jewish success story, reminding readers of those left behind by telling their stories with respect and compassion. It's what journalists do—even if such stories raise uncomfortable personal questions, as they did for Cowan himself.

He wrote: "I've always seen my politics as an outgrowth of the Jewish tradition that obliged one to work with the oppressed...but as I grew to care about people on the Lower East Side I became intensely aware that many of them would regard my ideas and activities as a form of betrayal. And the more I learned about their problems the more unsettling that contradiction became."

Cowan was that rare journalist who owned up to his shortcomings. He died of cancer in 1988 when he was only 48 years old, and his willingness to hold himself and his profession accountable is sorely missed today.

New York City and the surrounding region still have the largest number of poor and low-income Jewish households in the United States. According to one estimate, 20 percent of individual Jews live in a household with an income below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

Some are elderly—including, shamefully, Holocaust survivors. Others are ultra-Orthodox, caught in a complicated web of poverty dictated in part by strict adherence to tradition and custom. Others are poor not because they are Jewish, but because they live in an America where the flimsy social safety net cannot protect them when sudden unemployment, divorce, drug addiction, mental health issues, or other unforeseen circumstances leave them destitute.

Their stories rarely make today's version of the Jewish front page.

"For the media in general, poverty is a very difficult issue to cover," said Alan Abbey, media director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, who has studied global trends in Jewish media. "It oozes but doesn't break. It isn't a story that demands media attention in the way that politics or crime demands. The story doesn't have an easy, timely angle. The poor are always there."

Abbey's sharp assessment is largely correct. But after leading the Forward for more than a decade, I would argue—and I think that Abbey would agree—that the reasons why Jewish media rarely shine a spotlight on our community's poor and struggling are more varied and complicated.

Beyond the economic forces that shape today's news are, in this case, fraught questions of identity and focus. After all, Jewish media largely reflect Jewish preoccupations—and for the establishment, that is Israel and rising anti-Semitism, not the poverty inflicting an elderly man afraid to leave his apartment, or a Haredi family whose lifestyle is dramatically different from the majority of American Jews, or a single mother who lost her job when Toys R Us closed.

Because poverty is stubborn, and—at least in New York—widespread, we are forced to acknowledge that not all Jews are well-educated, economically successful, politically powerful, culturally assimilated, and, at a minimum, members of the middle class.

“There is a perception that Jewish poverty is an oxymoron,” a communal professional once told me. “There is a tremendous sense of denial in the Jewish community about how many Jews truly need help.”

To begin, there is the matter of resources. Paul Cowan spent weeks wandering the dilapidated streets of the Lower East Side, chatting with Jewish residents on park benches, and in stores and synagogues. He was invited into their homes because he earned their trust. This kind of reporting takes time, skill, and patience.

Today those resources are in short supply. Most Jewish media organizations are scrambling to adapt to the exigencies of the digital age—and its insatiable demands for faster, sexier stories—with fewer resources at their disposal and increased competition for a distracted audience.

Unfortunately, when poverty does make the headlines, coverage often focuses not on the poor themselves, but on the scandals shaking the operations and reputations of the Jewish institutions charged with addressing the issue. Those scandals make news. The persistent grind of living with poverty does not.

The truth is American Jews are generally more affluent and economically stable than other minority groups. So it stands to reason that news organizations serving the Jewish community should write about the mainstream, not the aberrational.

“I don't think of Jewish poverty as a priority story,” Andrew Silow-Carroll told me. He is now the editor-in-chief of JTA, and once edited a community newspaper in New Jersey. “Our poor are not as prevalent as other groups. We are more likely to cover Jewish responses to poverty, but I don't think it is as prevalent an issue as it would be for other ethnic press.”

Compounding the challenge of covering Jewish poverty is the fact that it can't be easily described or categorized. Even the broad label of “elderly” doesn't capture the complexity. For example, in New York City—the epicenter of Jewish poverty—poor elderly Jews who emigrated from Russia face a different set of circumstances than do survivors of the Holocaust.

The survivor population often suffers from unresolved psychological and emotional trauma. They may be resistant to publicity and cries for help.

Holocaust survivors “would go hungry before they would register [for social services],” one outreach worker in Queens told me. “They have lived with far less than they are living with now.”

And—here is the surprising news I have heard from a number of experts—these survivors are living longer, and therefore their needs will escalate, creating a longer-than-expected demand on social services for a population often unwilling to ask for assistance.

“There still is a tremendous shanda factor,” the communal professional said. “People are embarrassed because they are poor or needy. They don’t want to be seen.”

Ultra-Orthodox Jews present the opposite situation. With their distinctive dress, large families, strict religious practices, and tendency to live in close-knit neighborhoods, they are easily identified and just as easily (and sometimes unfairly) stereotyped. Though they make up only about one-third of the poor Jews in New York, in many minds they represent, as another communal leader told me, “a code word for poverty.”

There are reasons such code words exist. Secular education in many Haredi communities is demonstrably weak, leaving many men unemployable or underemployed—that is, if they wish to get a job instead of studying Jewish text full time, as many do. Women are often left struggling to balance outside work with the needs of large families, leading to a broad reliance on social welfare.

As I wrote in a Forward editorial in 2012, when the UJA-Federation released a major study showing the growth of Haredi poverty: “The poverty afflicting this large and growing proportion of devout Orthodox Jews in New York is a different kind of poverty than we are used to facing historically. It’s not the deprivation of immigrants arriving with a few dollars in their pockets. It’s not the desperation of refugees clinging to these liberating shores. It’s not a poverty born of the lingering discrimination that still leaves too many Americans without the education, skills and reasonable hope of escaping a never-ending cycle of need.”

In many ultra-Orthodox communities, an admirable network of voluntary organizations works to alleviate this poverty, providing needy neighbors everything from Shabbat meals to used wedding dresses. But, as has been documented, this self-help is sometimes buttressed by gaming the social service system, making the Haredim no different than other struggling groups in America who seek to get whatever they can from government assistance.

This complex picture is difficult to paint accurately and fairly in Jewish media. The relative isolation of most Haredi communities makes them a challenge to cover; they often don’t trust mainstream media and that leads to a lack of empathy from reporters and editors who are not from that world.

And then there is the question of what it really means to be poor in such communities.

Alexander Rapaport, the executive director of the Masbia soup kitchen network in New York, cautioned me not to mischaracterize the population he serves. “Poor families tend to be stable, happy,” he said. “The only thing that makes them poor is their tuition bills.”

The third subset of poor American Jews are those who fall upon hard times, either because of unforeseen circumstances, individual difficulties, or structural deficiencies. Some of these stories do rise to the front page of Jewish media.

During the 2008 recession, for example, there was suddenly a new category of Jews: white collar workers who lost jobs, homes, status, and independence. News organizations covered their plight, and wrote about the communal programs trying to help them recover.

Once the economy improved, however, those stories receded. And yet there remains a segment of the Jewish population that is stuck in poverty, largely invisible to the middle class mainstream. Danielle Ellman, the dynamic CEO of Commonpoint Queens, encounters them every day at the innovative digital food pantry she oversees inside what looks like a private home on a quiet side street in Forest Hills.

“There are Jewish people going to bed hungry every night, and that should be unacceptable to us,” she said.

In the end, the priorities of Jewish media largely reflect the priorities of the Jewish community—especially when journalistic value is shaped by digital activity—and poverty is not a priority. No media organization wants to publish stories online that no one will read. Community Jewish newspapers, dependent on their local federations for funding and readership, are urged to celebrate Jewish success, not highlight Jewish failure.

And the fact that there are so many poor Jews in America is a communal failure. It runs counter to the narrative that Jews are the ultimate American success story, that the biggest threat to the Jewish future is intermarriage, or anti-Semitism, or the demonization of Israel—or all of the above. It also runs counter to the liberal political narrative that positions Jews as privileged and more entitled than other minorities.

Decades ago, Paul Cowan understood that even in a nation plagued by racism and injustice, poverty also had a Jewish face. He acknowledged the contradiction in his coverage. I personally feel a deep regret that we in Jewish media have not followed his example today. Last October, after the worst terrorist attack against Jews in American history, I helped organize a joint statement signed by all the major Jewish news organizations decrying anti-Semitism and pledging to focus our journalism on this growing threat. Doesn't the prevalence of poverty among our fellow Jews deserve a similar outcry?